

# How Women Saved South Pass City, Wyoming

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**I**t all began quite innocently. As the State of Wyoming approached its 75th statehood birthday in 1965, it seemed sensible planning for the state to appoint a Commission to direct commemorative activities. Little did anyone realize that the end result would be an unusual “birthday present” to the State of Wyoming—the historical town of South Pass City, birthplace of women’s suffrage. By the time the drama ended, women were the key characters while additional roles were played by the Department of the Interior, three state agencies, two governors, and the Wyoming State Legislature.

Concurrent with the Legislative Act which created a 75th Anniversary commission, Legislator Edness Kimball Wilkins (D-Natrona County) co-sponsored a bill which appropriated \$50,000 to the Wyoming State Parks Commission for the purchase and repair of buildings at South Pass City. Support for the bill did not represent a sudden impulse on the part of Mrs. Wilkins. She was an avid amateur historian and a believer in both preservation and conservation. Along with a few sympathetic friends, she had long considered South Pass City a unique historic site, worthy of preservation. Mrs. Wilkins and her friends received appointments to the 75th Anniversary Commission and found an unexpected opportunity to preserve this endangered site.

Designated members of the legislature, along with State Parks Commission representatives, started purchase negotiations with the many South Pass City property owners. These negotiations faltered as legislative intent was questioned, the proposal’s language needed the Attorney General’s interpretation, and the necessity for additional funding became apparent. Months passed, and no concrete action toward the purchase took place.

Mrs. Wilkins, busy with her duties on the 75th Anniversary committee, knew negotiations had gone slowly. She also realized there was a possibility that the purchase could not be completed by the July 1, 1965, expiration date in the original appropriation bill. Accordingly, she introduced a bill during the 1965 Legislative session

for a continuation of the appropriation. Unfortunately, the bill went down in defeat. Wilkins and her friends now formulated alternative plans.

Earlier, the 75th Anniversary Commission had filed incorporation papers, borrowed money to finance their activities, sold commemorative items, and ultimately ended the celebration year with a comfortable profit. By their January 1966 meeting, Commission members were contemplating alternative uses for the surplus funds, which would be under the control of the Commission until 1968, when the Commission would be disbanded in accordance with the initial legislation.

Other agencies and groups had ideas about how the surplus monies should be spent. However, the Attorney General declared the funds must be returned to the General Fund. Members of the 75th Anniversary Commission met with the Attorney General and the representative of the Wyoming Travel Commission, then briefly adjourned for lunch. When they returned, the Commission members disclosed that they would use the funds to purchase South Pass City for the State of Wyoming as a “birthday present” and passed a resolution supporting the proposed acquisition. What a luncheon that must have been!

The Attorney General expressed doubt that the purchase could be made legally and suggested that the money be returned to the State of Wyoming with the *recommendation* that it be used to purchase South Pass City. The 75th Anniversary Commission members decided not to follow his advice.

It seemed nothing could dampen the enthusiasm of the Commission. Through the services of a local attorney, they completed the purchase of approximately three acres and a number of South Pass City historic buildings by the time of their next meeting in May 1966. However, the intervening period was not without drama. Mrs. Wilkins later recalled, “The way we saved it was unbelievable.”

The day following that determined 75th Anniversary Commission resolution to purchase South Pass City, Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Messick

paid a visit to the Attorney General. He continued to express doubt about the legality of the purchase, stating that the action went against the intent of the Legislature, which had recently defeated the bill to extend the funding.

Nonetheless, both Mrs. Alice Messick, of Douglas, Wyoming, and Mrs. Wilkins, along with the local attorney who represented the 75th Anniversary Commission, conducted purchase negotiations with the primary property owners, Mr. and Mrs. Woodring. After vigorous bargaining, the Woodrings, who operated a small store and private museum at the site, finally accepted the \$25,000 price offered by the 75th Anniversary Commission members.

Tensions increased during the ensuing days as an assistant to the governor attempted unsuccessfully to stop payment on the escrow check, and legislative members called to protest the purchase. The Attorney General called and told Commission members that they could not purchase the historic city and that he would render an opinion to that effect. The Commission members told him they did not want his written opinion and they had disregarded his verbal opinion. Ultimately, the Commission members stood firm.

By the time the Commission met again on May 26, 1966, passions had cooled somewhat; and both the Attorney General and the Governor appeared to be resigned to the purchase. The Secretary of State actually sent a letter of congratulations to the Commission. Meanwhile, the Bureau of Land Management, a federal agency, offered technical assistance, land leases, and generally was most supportive and encouraging in the upcoming years.

Meanwhile, at the request of the newly elected Governor, Stanley Hathaway, the Legislature formed the Old South Pass Historical Preserve to administer the site. Many members serving as part of this new group were previously members of the 75th Anniversary Commission. From 1967 to 1969, this group of intrepid volunteers, including Mrs. Wilkins, Mrs. Messick, and Dorothe Cable, a former employee of the Wyoming Travel Commission, fought to keep the South Pass City operation financially solvent. They did not receive any state appropriations for operating expenses because the Legislature created the Preserve, but then refused to fund it.

Political motives? Probably not. Legislative indifference in the 1960s to the preservation of this and other historic places played a larger role than politics. As late as 1983, Mrs. Cable believed that this indifference continued since the Legislature seemed unaware of the significance of Wyoming's history and repeatedly refused to fund

the operation and preservation expenses of South Pass City and other state historic sites. It was not until the mid-1980s, when the Legislature sought to develop a nascent tourist industry, that the value of historic places such as South Pass City was fully recognized. Finally, funding requests for interpretation and preservation received thoughtful legislative consideration.

The members of the Old South Pass Historic Preserve Commission arrived at the site. Trash and debris filled many of the buildings. Other structures had been vandalized, while some buildings were partially dismantled by local residents who pirated construction materials for their own use.

The Ladies Club of Lander immediately offered their services to help with cleaning, cataloging, and moving articles from the many abandoned buildings to the general store, which was considered a safe structure. Many families with close ties to South Pass City searched their attics and homes, seeking antiques and other artifacts associated with the historic site. They donated these items in a burst of enthusiasm and generated local support for the creation of displays and museum interpretations.

Initially, the volunteers took inventory, gave tours to visitors, cleaned up the site, and preserved the buildings. At least one volunteer remained at the site at all times in the early days. Mrs. Cable remembers that the mostly female volunteers occasionally felt uneasy about staying alone at the site, but they believed they had a public trust to uphold.

Living on the site offered challenges in daily living for the three women. There was no running water in the buildings. The cold and refreshing solution was to wash their faces and hands in the nearby creek when they hauled water to their living quarters for other purposes. The sanitary facilities consisted of a few outdoor structures. The women slept in the old hotel one of the few buildings immediately habitable.

The initial plan for the site's interpretation focused primarily on Esther Hobart Morris, first female justice of the peace in the United States, and the story of women's suffrage in Wyoming. Publicity about the town and the region began. As news of the public ownership of the site spread, members faced a busy tourist season, completely dependent on volunteers. They fought offers to commercialize the site, relying only upon the proceeds from the sale of a cookbook and a \$.25 admission fee. By the end of the first year, they had enough funds to hire a caretaker, which relieved some of the burden on the volunteers. But the task nonetheless proved to be too enormous.

Reluctantly, the Preserve members requested that the property be administered by an established state agency—the Wyoming Recreation Commission (WRC). In 1969, the legislature gave responsibility for the buildings to WRC and for the museum/interpretation function to the Archives, Museums and Historical Department (AMH). The ensuing jurisdictional confusion often led to embarrassing public arguments about the site's future.

Finally, in 1981, the responsibility for long-range planning and restoration was transferred to the Historic Preservation Division of the Wyoming Recreation Commission. This transfer gave the agency architectural control of the preservation process. Limited interpretation responsibilities fell to the division also. Gradually, interagency disagreements and feuds faded until ended by their merger into the Department of Commerce in the late 1980s.

In recent years, legislative support for South Pass City restoration and preservation and for programs and special events has been forthcoming. Regardless of the legislative reasons for not supporting both the purchase and the later operation of South Pass City in the early years, the historic site was saved from either commercialism or total decay through boldness and perseverance. As

Mrs. Wilkins said in retrospect, "It was about the proudest achievement of my life that we saved South Pass City."

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Rebecca Joseph

## Cranberry Bogs to Parks Ethnography and Women's History

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**W**hy are today's Iroquois and New England farm women critical to preserving the landscape of the Revolutionary War? Why is Cape Verdean women's knowledge of traditional production methods essential to accurately interpreting an early-20th-century cranberry bog on Cape Cod? What can African-American and white women tell us about the recent history of Saint Paul's Church and its surroundings in Mount Vernon, New York, that is not revealed in diocesan and other official records? How can Women's Rights National Historical Park increase visitation by women of color and their families?

These and other questions linking women in present-day communities with cultural resources in national parks in the Northeast are being

answered in recent ethnographic studies and related undertakings of the National Park Service's Applied Ethnography Program. By working with parks, neighboring communities, and other associated groups, the Applied Ethnography Program can ensure more inclusive, culturally informed protection and preservation of the resources required to fully appreciate our national heritage.

Ethnography offers both a conceptual basis for studying human groups and a methodology for studying one or more aspects of a living group's way of life from that group's perspective. Cultural anthropologists work from the premise that **culture** is a central, if not the most important, factor in human behavior. Cultural anthropologists practicing ethnography can identify and address the potential shortcomings of culture-bound frame-